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The Nature and Role of Attentional Resources in
Controlled and Automatic Detection: A Final Report

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James E. Hoffman and Billie Nelson

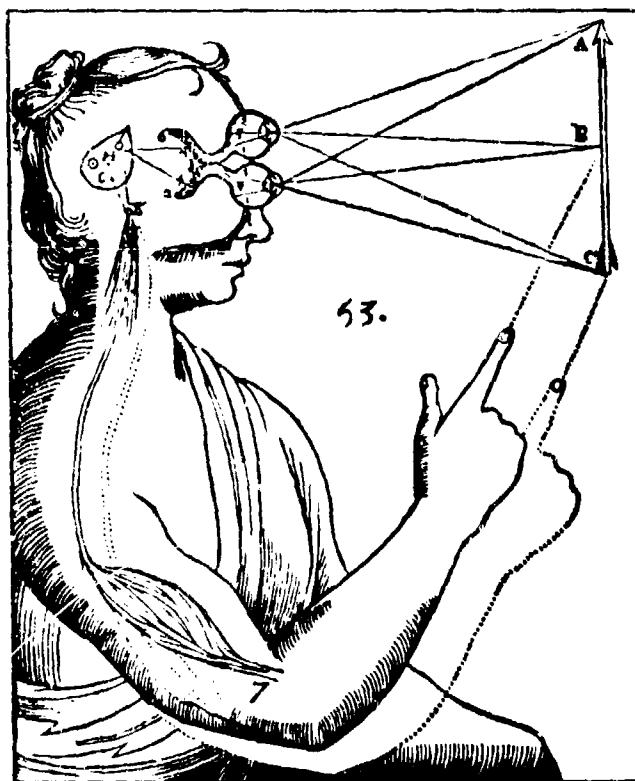
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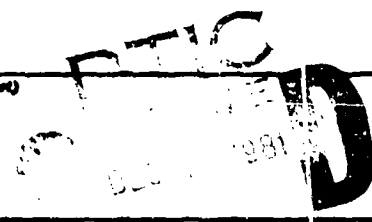
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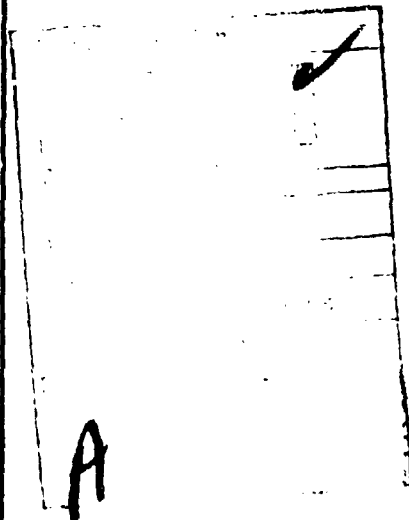
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The occurrence of automatic visual targets produces a shift of the visual spatial attention system to the area of the target. This reallocation of attention enhances the visual representation of the target and any other forms within the attentional field. Subjects do not have complete control of this process since automatic targets disrupt performance on the concurrent task even when subjects are instructed to ignore them.

In addition to the spatial attention system, automatic detection requires use of comparison processes in working memory. Even partial attention to a secondary task delays the occurrence of the overt detection response suggesting that decisions on two concurrent tasks must occur in working memory in a serial fashion. Converging evidence from an event-related potential (ERP) experiment supports this conclusion. The magnitude of the P300 component of the ERP, which indexes decision making in working memory, was found to be similar for both controlled and automatic detection tasks.

Extensive training in detection tasks does not result in a skill that is "resource-free." The main function of consistent-mapping training may be to refine the triggering conditions for the application of limited perceptual resources.



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The Nature and Role of Attentional Resources in Controlled
and Automatic Detection: A Final Report

James E. Hoffman and Billie C. Nelson

University of Delaware

Abstract

A series of experiments examined the role of attentional resources in automatic detection by pairing a consistently mapped visual target detection task with a series of concurrent discrimination tasks. The pattern of inter-task interference suggested that automatic detection requires two distinct kinds of resources.

The occurrence of automatic visual targets produces a shift of the visual spatial attention system to the area of the target. This reallocation of attention enhances the visual representation of the target and any other forms within the attentional field. Subjects do not have complete control of this process since automatic targets disrupt performance on the concurrent task even when subjects are instructed to ignore them.

In addition to the spatial attention system, automatic detection requires use of comparison processes in working memory. Even partial attention to a secondary task delays the occurrence of the overt detection response suggesting that decisions on two concurrent tasks must occur in working memory in a serial fashion. Converging evidence from an event-related potential (ERP) experiment supports this conclusion. The magnitude of the P300 component of the ERP, which indexes decision making in working memory, was found to be similar for both controlled and automatic detection tasks.

Extensive training in detection tasks does not result in a skill that is "resource-free." The main function of consistent-mapping training may be to refine the triggering conditions for the application of limited perceptual resources.

Performance of perceptual-motor and cognitive skills improves with practice. Performance becomes faster, more accurate, and most strikingly, apparently effortless. The ability to "automatize" skills is a key ingredient of successful performance in situations requiring the observer to "time-share" several tasks. Indeed, massive practice in a skill can produce truly remarkable time-sharing performances. Both skilled typists and pianists have been able to combine their skills with an auditory shadowing task without mutual interference (Shaffer, 1975; Allport, Antonis, & Reynolds, 1972). These observations suggest that training may reduce the attention required by a task so that it can be combined with other attention-demanding skills without exceeding the subject's total processing resources. Such a view has several practical implications, the most important being that intensive training may allow personnel to meet increased work-loads without any degradation in performance.

Work conducted under the previous contract (N00014-78-C-0762) was designed to explore the resource requirements of a highly trained skill; the principal question being: are there "hidden" resource costs associated with an automatic skill and, if so, what in the nature of such resources?

Dual-Task Experiments in Automatic Detection

The skill we chose to investigate was visual target detection, primarily because the training conditions underlying the development of this skill have been thoroughly explored (Schneider & Shiffrin, 1977). Schneider and Shiffrin (1977) showed that allowing a subject to search for the same set of targets in a constant set of distractors, a training regimen known as consistent mapping or CM, produced search times that were relatively

independent of processing load, defined as the product of the number of display characters and number of potential targets. In contrast, when targets and distractors periodically exchanged roles, a training schedule which is varied mapping or VM, search time was a linear function of processing load with a slope of about 40 msec per character.

An extensive series of experiments led Schneider and Shiffrin to characterize the processing modes produced by these two training schedules as being qualitatively different. VM training leads to controlled processing which is slow, serial, under subject control, and makes extensive use of short-term memory. CM training leads to automatic processing which is fast, parallel, inflexible, and does not require short-term memory.

If we assume that short-term memory is the primary source of capacity limitations in information processing (Shiffrin, 1978), then CM training in target detection should allow the observer to combine this skill with other tasks without mutual interference. We tested this prediction by combining a CM search task with a variety of concurrent discrimination tasks. The principal question was: To what extent is the speed and accuracy of automatic detection independent of demands made by other competing cognitive tasks? The role of spatial attention in automatic detection was of particular interest. Both Neisser (1967) and Schneider and Shiffrin (1977) reported that extensive training in visual search resulted in the target "popping out of the page." This pop-out phenomenon may explain why subject's performance on a controlled search task is impaired by the presence of a to-be-ignored CM target.

Our goal was to develop objective measures of the spatial allocation of attention and to use these measures to determine whether the ability of CM targets to trigger a shift of spatial attention plays a functional role

in detection. Figure 1 shows the general procedure. Subjects search for the presence of digits in a display of letters and indicate their decision with a speeded yes/no response. In addition, they must discriminate which of four light points located in the vicinity of the display characters is briefly extinguished.

The relative amount of attention to be paid to each task is varied across different blocks. For example, the subject is instructed to pay 90%/10% attention to the search and flicker tasks respectively. The pairs of performance values generated under different attention instructions produces a performance-operating-characteristic or POC (Sperling & Melchner, 1978; Navon & Gopher, 1979). When performance in dual-task conditions is equivalent to that obtained in single task conditions (100% attention devoted to the task) then the POC will appear to be a rectangle with one corner located at the single task performance levels. Increasing interference between tasks is reflected in POC's "below" this independence point.

Four major results were reported (Technical Report 8101) with this methodology. First, the POC was below the independence point indicating that the search task and flicker task were in competition for a limited resource and that subjects could control the allocation of this resource. Second, subjects detected automatic targets more often when they occurred adjacent to the flicker than when they occurred in nonadjacent positions (spatial adjacency effect). Third, subject's performance on the flicker task was impaired in the presence of an automatic target even when subjects were attempting to devote 100% attention to the flicker task (the "intrusion effect"). Fourth, even partial attention to the flicker task produced a large delay in the latency of the search response.

These results suggest that partial activation of the long-term memory mode representing the automatic target produces a shift of attention to the targets spatial area. This allocation of attention further increases the activation level producing a higher probability of detection. Following the formation of a data representation for the visual information, a procedure in short-term memory maps the occurrence of a target into an appropriate response. Dual task interference occurs on two levels. First, since spatial attention is a shareable resource (Navon & Gopher, 1979) only when visual information for each task falls in the same attentional field (Technical Report #8002), nonadjacent visual information will produce a trade-off in activation levels.

Second, because short-term memory is of limited capacity, it is unable to accommodate productions required to discriminate information for each task as well as to produce the required motor output for the search task. In dual-task conditions, this latter production has to be read into short-term memory following decisions on each task producing a delayed response.

This position makes two predictions. First, trade-off between CM detection accuracy and another concurrent discrimination should depend critically on the degree to which the two tasks allow for a sharing of spatial attention. Second, the delay in the CM detection response should be relatively independent of the nature of the concurrent task since all discriminations, even those involving different modalities, depend on procedures in a single amodal short-term memory.

The first prediction was tested with the procedure shown in Figure 2. Here, the concurrent task combined with the CM detection task occurs at the center of the display. Spatial attention can be either focused on the

center or distributed in the periphery allowing for little sharing between tasks. Large trade-offs in performance accuracy were obtained with this procedure and the intrusive effects of automatic targets were eliminated. The delay in the CM detection response was similar to that obtained with the flicker task.

The triggering of the spatial attention system by automatic targets was confirmed in a third experiment employing the procedure shown in Figure 3. The orientation of the U-shaped figure was easier to discriminate when it occurred adjacent to the CM target than when it appeared in other display locations. Once again, this demonstrates that discrimination of visual forms depends on spatial attention and that dual-task performance is aided by allowing spatial attention to be shared.

These results show quite clearly that spatial attention plays a functional role in the skill of automatic detection. CM targets trigger a shift of spatial attention to their display area, improving their own data representation as well as that of other nearby forms. These data also pose a puzzle. If CM targets are processed deeply enough to trigger a shift of attention to their area, why are further resources required for detection? This is really a question of the role played by spatial attention in form discrimination. Treisman and Gelade (1980) have recently proposed a role for visual attention that may clarify this puzzle. They suggest that the visual world outside the focus of attention consists of a set of unrelated features such as color, shape, etc. It is only within the focus of attention that feature sets are integrated into objects. A prediction of this theory is that features from different locations outside the focus of attention can combine to produce "illusory objects," a prediction confirmed

by Treisman and Gelade. They also reported that extensive training in looking for targets defined by feature conjunctions (e.g., "a green H") did not eliminate the need for attention.

It may be that in our experiments, spatial attention was allocated to the position of the CM target in order to verify that features present in that location were in fact a conjunction representing a CM target and not produced by illusory conjunctions of distractor features. This suggests that illusory conjunctions and therefore false alarms should increase in the CM detection task when attentional shifts are prevented. This is exactly what occurred with the procedure shown in Figure 2. False alarm rates in this experiment were 3 to 4 times those obtained with the other two procedures (Figures 1 and 3). Evidently, when subjects were focused on the center of the display, they suffered a large number of illusory conjunctions of letter features that looked like digits. This hypothesis should be examined directly, however, by varying the nature of the distractor letters in terms of their feature overlap with CM targets.

Mixed Modality Time-Sharing

Although CM detection accuracy depended critically on the nature of the concurrent task in dual-task situations, the delay of the CM response was relatively invariant across tasks. If the response delay does, in fact, represent a competition for an amodal short-term memory then it should be obtained even when a visual detection task is combined with an auditory discrimination task. To test this prediction, we combined a visual CM detection task with an auditory tone discrimination task and a visual orientation symbol task similar to the one shown in Figure 3, in alternating sessions. Table 1 shows how performance on each of these tasks depended

on the presence or absence of the CM target digit across different attention conditions.

Table 1
d' on Concurrent Task for Trials on Which
the CM Target is Present or Absent

		Percent Attention Allocated to Visual or Auditory Task			
		10	50	90	100
Visual Task	Present	.85	.89	.96	1.43
	Absent	1.20	1.40	1.48	1.54
Auditory Task	Present	.85	.98	.91	1.05
	Absent	.80	.89	.93	1.10

The most striking result in this table is the robust intrusion effect when both tasks are in the same modality and the complete absence of this effect for mixed modalities. This verifies our contention that the intrusion effect represents a call by the CM target for a modality specific resource.

Table 2 shows CM response latency as a function of the modality of the concurrent task across different attention conditions. These data show a delay of response in dual-task conditions, independent of the modality of the concurrent task. This experiment provides a striking confirmation of the separate resource pools that play a role in automatic detection. Both a modality specific resource of spatial attention as well as an amodal resource in working memory are involved in different aspects of highly skilled detection and response.

Table 2
CM Search Reaction Time (msec) as a Function of the
Modality of the Concurrent Task

	Percent Attention Devoted to Search Task			
	100	90	50	10
Visual	700	937	975	1064
Auditory	700	922	941	1004

Event-Related Potentials in Automatic and Controlled Detection

The delay of the CM detection response in dual-task conditions could be due to a delay in just the motor response or a delay in the actual detection decision. One way to measure decision time independent of response time is to measure the latency of the P300 component of the event-related potential (ERP). The P300 component appears to index human decision making in a variety of detection and recognition tasks (Donchin, Ritter, & McCellum, 1978) and appears to be separable from the timing of the overt response. It would be of interest to measure the latency of the P300 component elicited by CM target detection and determine if it is delayed in dual-task conditions.

As a preliminary to this dual-task experiment, we measured ERPs elicited by targets in both CM and VM training schedules. This experiment can provide converging evidence for our supposition that automatic detection requires short-term or working memory. Donchin and his colleagues in a series of clever experiments (Israel, Chesney, Wickens, & Donchin, 1980;

Israel, Wickens, Chesney, & Donchin, 1980) have shown that P300 amplitude is a sensitive index of the resources allocated to a task. If CM detection requires a smaller resource investment than VM detection, then CM targets should produce smaller P300 components. In Technical Report #8102 we reported that P300 amplitudes for these two tasks are quite comparable.

Comparing Controlled and Automatic Detection Resource Costs

Although our dual-task experiments show quite clearly that CM detection requires attention, it might be argued that any attentional involvement is less than would be found for VM detection. Two experiments have directly compared CM and VM detection and found virtually identical dual-task trade-offs. The first (Report #8001) combined the flicker task of Figure 1 with CM and VM detection tasks. Presentation of the search arrays was supra-threshold making search reaction time the measure of interest. The results are simply stated: Both CM and VM RT was delayed in dual-task conditions and by the same amount. Similarly, flicker accuracy was impaired in dual-task conditions to the same extent by both types of detection. We recently confirmed these results in threshold conditions utilizing search accuracy as the measure.

Conclusions

In summary, a variety of dual-task experiments indicate that a highly trained and presumably automatic target detection task requires several different resources for effective performance. Features that match automatic targets trigger a shift of attention to their display area so that focused attention can eliminate illusory conjunctions and verify the presence of an automatic target. Preventing these shifts results in a large decrease in detection accuracy.

A second resource involved in automatic detection consists of the comparison, decision, and response execution processes of working memory. These procedures must be accessed serially and are a potent source of inter-task interference, especially when speeded responses are required. We found that all tasks we have studied, regardless of their spatial nature or even their sensory modality, impose approximately the same delay on the execution of the CM response.

Perhaps the most surprising result of these dual-task experiments is that not only does CM detection require resources but to about the same extent as VM detection as indicated by equivalent dual-task trade-offs. Is it possible that, in general, both controlled and automatic tasks have the same resource requirements? If so, what is the advantage of extensive training in time-sharing situations?

First, it should be recognized that our experiments represent rather special circumstance. In particular, CM detection accuracy only suffers when the concurrent task is one which offers simultaneous competition for the spatial attention system. Other experiments (Schneider & Fisk, 1980) in which there is no competition for a spatial attention system do not show dual-task trade-offs in accuracy. This finding is in keeping with results reported by Kahneman (1981) that even reading of highly overlearned words is impaired by competing visual inputs. The spatial attention system evidently plays a similar role in both CM and VM detection tasks.

The second restriction on our results is that all tasks were chosen to be relatively light in their demands on short-term memory. The fact that to-be-ignored CM targets can intrude on other controlled search processes indicates that rehearsal of CM target set is not required to keep their

long-term memory (LTM) nodes in an active state. Active rehearsal of LTM nodes does, however, play a significant role in VM detection, as shown by Fisk and Schneider (1981). Preventing rehearsal of the memory set impairs VM search while having little or no effect on CM search accuracy. CM detection latency, however, should, according to our analysis, show a deleterious effect of short-term memory load.

Anderson (1980) offers a useful perspective on the development of skills. He points out that initially a skill is represented in a declarative fashion and can usually be verbalized. Continued practice results in the skill becoming represented as procedures. If a skill initially consists of several different procedures, continued practice may allow these procedures to become "compiled" into one procedure which, once initiated by appropriate triggering conditions, may be executed without the involvement of attention.

Our time-sharing experiments make it clear that this completion stage never occurred for the search task. The mapping of a decision onto a motor response remained a separate procedure throughout training. This procedure had to be activated after the discrimination procedure in dual-task conditions producing a delayed response.

It is possible that massive training in motor skills does result in a complete compilation of the several procedures that initially make up the skill. Skilled typists, for example, receive large amounts of consistent mapping training in pairing a particular keypress with a particular symbol. Even here, however, it seems likely that motor output productions remain separate from other procedures. The typist does not "automatically" type when presented with visual material but must maintain an intention to do so (Schaeffer, 1976). Further, varying amounts of effort may be invested in

the typing process to reflect different speed pressures. This control that is maintained over an automatic skill may well reveal itself in dual-task experiments of the type discussed in this paper. The role of attention in continuous, highly practiced skills remains an important direction for future research.

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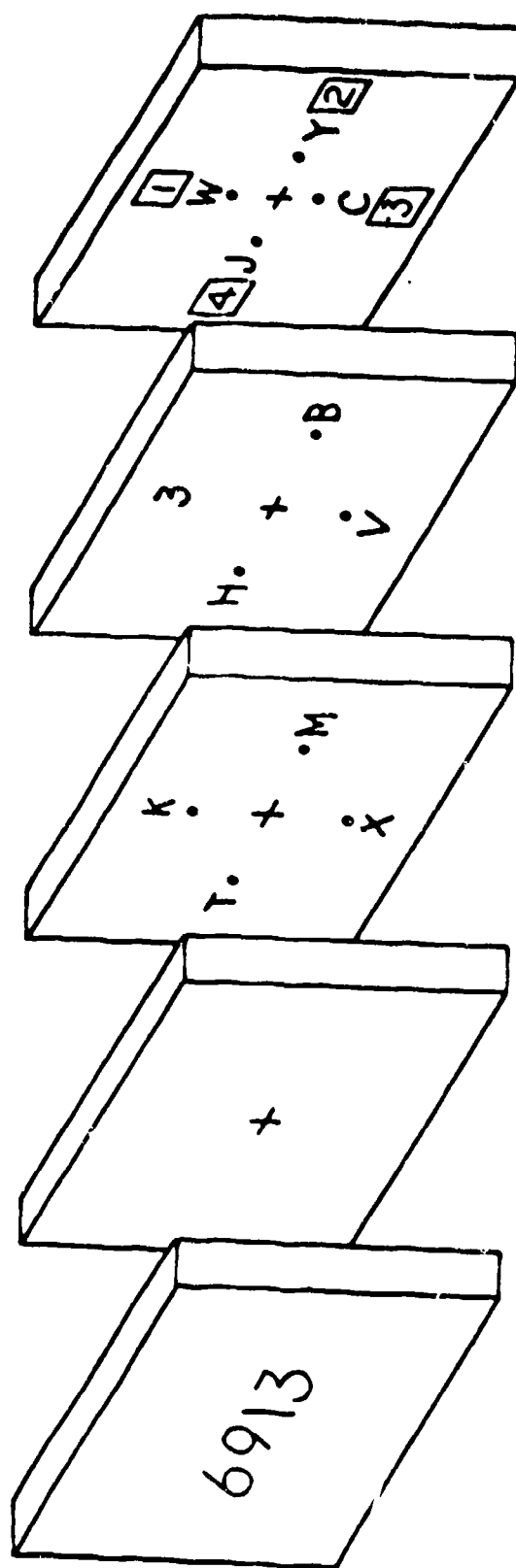


Figure 1: Sequence of events occurring on each trial of Experiment 1. Following presentation of the memory set the subject viewed three arrays: a pre-mask, a target array, and a postmask. In dual task conditions subjects were required to determine whether a digit was present and which of four light points was briefly extinguished.

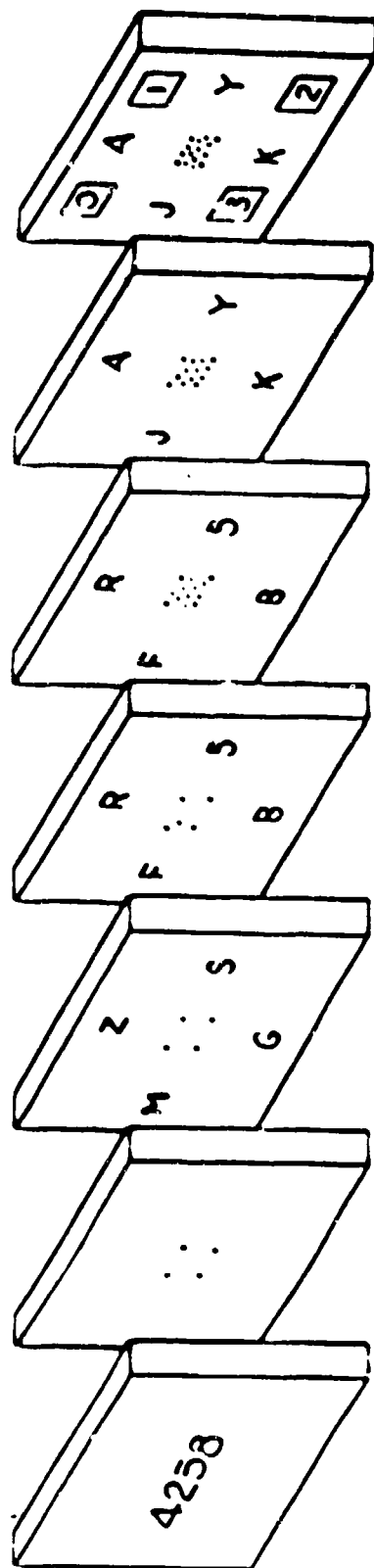
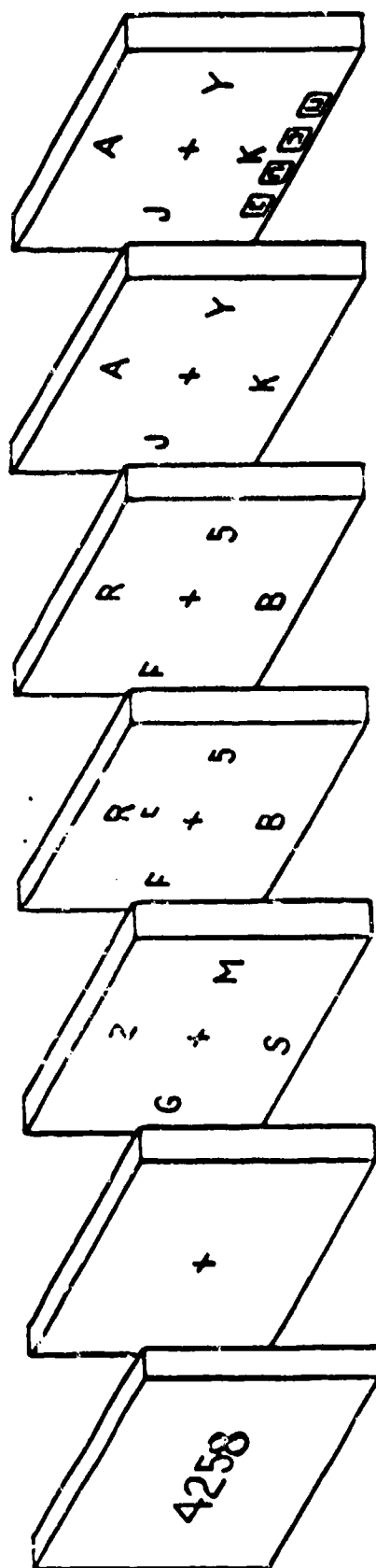


Figure 2: Sequence of events occurring on each trial of Experiment 2. The subject was required to determine whether a digit was present and to judge the direction of displacement of a centrally located dot. The occurrence of the dot was followed by a random field of masking dots.

SAME FRAME



SUCCESSIVE FRAMES

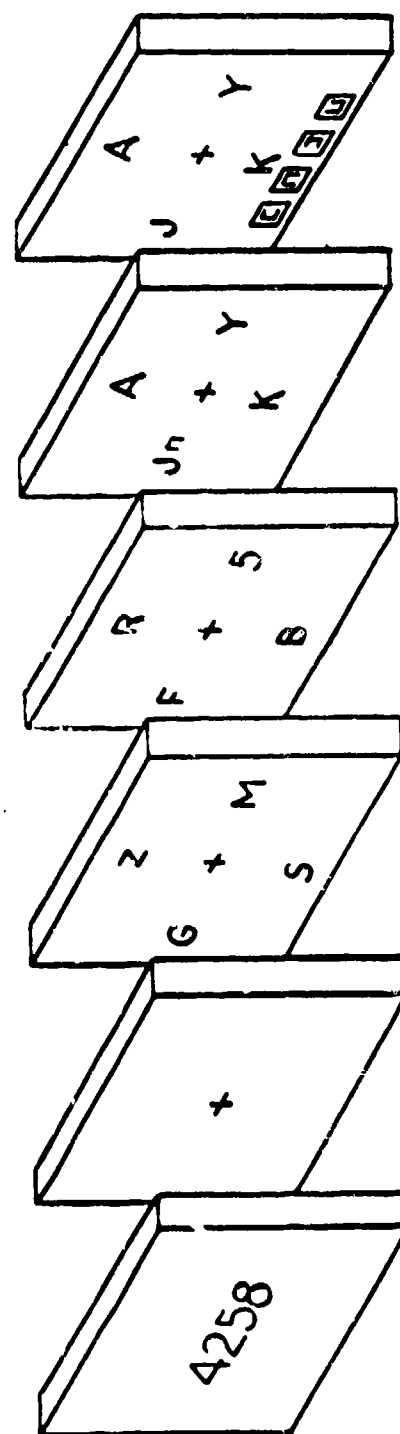


Figure 3: Sequence of events occurring on each of two kinds of trials in Experiment 3. In the "same frame" condition, the subject was required to determine whether a digit was present as well as to judge the orientation of a simultaneously presented L-shaped figure. In the "successive frame" condition, the L-shaped figure occurred with the onset of the postmask.

Navy

- 1 Dr. Arthur Bachrach
Environmental Stress Program Center
Naval Medical Research Institute
Bethesda, MD 20014
- 1 CDR Thomas Berghage
Naval Health Research Center
San Diego, CA 92152
- 1 Dr. Alvah Bittner
Naval Biodynamics Laboratory
New Orleans, Louisiana 70189
- 1 Dr. Robert Breaux
Code N-711
NAVTRAEQUIPCEN
Orlando, FL 32813
- 1 Chief of Naval Education and Training
Liason Office
Air Force Human Resource Laboratory
Flying Training Division
WILLIAMS AFB, AZ 85224
- 1 CDR Mike Curran
Office of Naval Research
800 N. Quincy St.
Code 270
Arlington, VA 22217
- 1 DR. PAT FEDERICC
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Navy Personnel R&D Center
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- 1 Dr. Richard Gibson
Bureau of medicine and surgery
Code 3C13
Navy Department
Washington, DC 20372
- 1 LT Steven D. Harris, MSC, USN
Code 6021
Naval Air Development Center
Warminster, Pennsylvania 18974

Navy

- 1 Dr. Lloyd Hitchcock
Human Factors Engineering
Division (6022)
Naval Air Development Center
Warminster, PA 18974
- 1 Dr. Jim Hollan
Code 304
Navy Personnel R & D Center
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Naval Air Systems Command Hq
AIR-340F
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- 1 CDR Robert S. Kennedy
Head, Human Performance Sciences
Naval Aerospace Medical Research Lab
Box 29407
New Orleans, LA 70189
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Naval Air Station Memphis (75)
Millington, TN 38054
- 1 Mr. Orvin A. Laron
Code 306
Navy Personnel R&D Center
San Diego, CA 92152
- 1 Dr. William L. Maloy
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Education and Training
Naval Training Command, Code 00A
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Systems Engineering Test Directorate
U.S. Naval Air Test Center
Patuxent River, MD 20670

Navy

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OP-987H
Washington, DC 20350
- 1 Dr. Alfred F. Smode
Training Analysis & Evaluation Group
(TAEG)
Dept. of the Navy
Orlando, FL 32813
- 1 W. Gary Thomson
Naval Ocean Systems Center
Code 7132
San Diego, CA 92152
- 1 Roger Weissinger-Baylon
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Naval Postgraduate School
Monterey, CA 93940
- 1 Dr. Ronald Weitzman
Code 54 WZ
Department of Administrative Sciences
U. S. Naval Postgraduate School
Monterey, CA 93940
- 1 Dr. Robert Wherry
562 Mallard Drive
Chalfont, PA 18914
- 1 Dr. Robert Wisher
Code 309
Navy Personnel R&D Center
San Diego, CA 92152
- 1 DR. MARTIN F. WISKOFF
NAVY PERSONNEL R& D CENTER
SAN DIEGO, CA 92152
- 1 Mr John H. Wolfe
Code P310
U. S. Navy Personnel Research and
Development Center
San Diego, CA 92152

Army

- 1 Technical Director
U. S. Army Research Institute for the
Behavioral and Social Sciences
5001 Eisenhower Avenue
Alexandria, VA 22333
- 1 Dr. Beatrice J. Farr
U. S. Army Research Institute
5001 Eisenhower Avenue
Alexandria, VA 22333
- 1 Dr. Michael Kaplan
U.S. ARMY RESEARCH INSTITUTE
5001 EISENHOWER AVENUE
ALEXANDRIA, VA 22333
- 1 Dr. Milton S. Katz
Training Technical Area
U.S. Army Research Institute
5001 Eisenhower Avenue
Alexandria, VA 22333
- 1 Dr. Harold F. O'Neil, Jr.
Attn: PERI-OK
Army Research Institute
5001 Eisenhower Avenue
Alexandria, VA 22333
- 1 Dr. Robert Sasmor
U. S. Army Research Institute for the
Behavioral and Social Sciences
5001 Eisenhower Avenue
Alexandria, VA 22333
- 1 Dr. Joseph Ward
U.S. Army Research Institute
5001 Eisenhower Avenue
Alexandria, VA 22333

Air Force

- 1 U.S. Air Force Office of Scientific Research
Life Sciences Directorate, NL
Bolling Air Force Base
Washington, DC 20332
- 1 Air University Library
AUL/LSE 76/443
Maxwell AFB, AL 36112
- 1 Dr. Earl A. Alluisi
HQ, AFHRL (AFSC)
Brooks AFB, TX 78235
- 1 Dr. Genevieve Haddad
Program Manager
Life Sciences Directorate
AFOSR
Bolling AFB, DC 20332

Marines

- 1 H. William Greenup
Education Advisor (EO31)
Education Center, MCDEC
Quantico, VA 22134
- 1 Special Assistant for Marine Corps Matters
Code 100M
Office of Naval Research
800 N. Quincy St.
Arlington, VA 22217
- 1 DR. A.L. SLAFKOSKY
SCIENTIFIC ADVISOR (CODE RD-1)
HQ, U.S. MARINE CORPS
WASHINGTON, DC 20380

CoastGuard

- 1 Chief, Psychological Reserch Branch
U. S. Coast Guard (G-P-1/2/TP42)
Washington, DC 20593

Other DoD

- 12 Defense Technical Information Center
Cameron Station, Bldg 5
Alexandria, VA 22314
Attn: TC
- 1 Military Assistant for Training and
Personnel Technology
Office of the Under Secretary of Defense
for Research & Engineering
Room 3D129, The Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301
- 1 DARPA
1400 Wilson Blvd.
Arlington, VA 22209

Civil Govt

- 1 Dr. Paul G. Chapin
Linguistics Program
National Science Foundation
Washington, DC 20550
- 1 Dr. Susan Chipman
Learning and Development
National Institute of Education
1200 19th Street NW
Washington, DC 20208
- 1 William J. McLaurin
66610 Howie Court
Camp Springs, MD 20031
- 1 Dr. Andrew R. Molnar
Science Education Dev.
and Research
National Science Foundation
Washington, DC 20550
- 1 Dr. Joseph Psotka
National Institute of Education
1200 19th St. NW
Washington, DC 20208
- 1 Dr. H. Wallace Sinaiko
Program Director
Manpower Research and Advisory Services
Smithsonian Institution
801 North Pitt Street
Alexandria, VA 22314
- 1 Dr. Frank Withrow
U. S. Office of Education
400 Maryland Ave. SW
Washington, DC 20202
- 1 Dr. Joseph L. Young, Director
Memory & Cognitive Processes
National Science Foundation
Washington, DC 20550

Non Govt

- 1 Dr. John R. Anderson
Department of Psychology
Carnegie Mellon University
Pittsburgh, PA 15213
- 1 Anderson, Thomas H., Ph.D.
Center for the Study of Reading
174 Children's Research Center
51 Gerty Drive
Champaign, IL 61820
- 1 Dr. John Annett
Department of Psychology
University of Warwick
Coventry CV4 7AL
ENGLAND
- 1 DR. MICHAEL ATWOOD
SCIENCE APPLICATIONS INSTITUTE
40 DENVER TECH. CENTER WEST
7935 E. PRENTICE AVENUE
ENGLEWOOD, CO 80110
- 1 1 psychological research unit
Dept. of Defense (Army Office)
Campbell Park Offices
Canberra ACT 2600, Australia
- 1 Dr. Alan Baddeley
Medical Research Council
Applied Psychology Unit
15 Chaucer Road
Cambridge CB2 2EF
ENGLAND
- 1 Dr. Patricia Raggett
Department of Psychology
University of Colorado
Boulder, CO 80309
- 1 Dr. Jonathan Baron
Dept. of Psychology
University of Pennsylvania
3813-15 Walnut St. T-3
Philadelphia, PA 19104

Non Govt

- 1 Mr Avron Barr
Department of Computer Science
Stanford University
Stanford, CA 94305
- 1 Dr. Jackson Beatty
Department of Psychology
University of California
Los Angeles, CA 90024
- 1 CDR Robert J. Biersner
Program Manager
Human Performance
Navy Medical R&D Command
Bethesda, MD 20014
- 1 Dr. Ina Bilodeau
Department of Psychology
Tulane University
New Orleans, LA 70118
- 1 Liaison Scientists
Office of Naval Research,
Branch Office, London
Box 39 FPO New York 09510
- 1 Dr. Lyle Bourne
Department of Psychology
University of Colorado
Boulder, CO 80309
- 1 Dr. John S. Brown
XEROX Palo Alto Research Center
3333 Coyote Road
Palo Alto, CA 94304
- 1 Dr. Pat Carpenter
Department of Psychology
Carnegie-Mellon University
Pittsburgh, PA 15213
- 1 Dr. John B. Carroll
Psychometric Lab
Univ. of No. Carolina
Davie Hall 013A
Chapel Hill, NC 27514

Non Govt

- 1 Dr. William Chase
Department of Psychology
Carnegie Mellon University
Pittsburgh, PA 15213
- 1 Dr. Micheline Chi
Learning R & D Center
University of Pittsburgh
3939 O'Hara Street
Pittsburgh, PA 15213
- 1 Dr. William Clancey
Department of Computer Science
Stanford University
Stanford, CA 94305
- 1 Dr. Allan M. Collins
Bolt Beranek & Newman, Inc.
50 Moulton Street
Cambridge, Ma 02138
- 1 Dr. Lynn A. Cooper
LRDC
University of Pittsburgh
3939 O'Hara Street
Pittsburgh, PA 15213
- 1 Dr. Meredith P. Crawford
American Psychological Association
1200 17th Street, N.W.
Washington, DC 20036
- 1 Dr. Kenneth B. Cross
Anacapa Sciences, Inc.
P.O. Drawer Q
Santa Barbara, CA 93102
- 1 Dr. Diane Damos
Arizona State University
Tempe, AZ 85281
- 1 Dr. Ronna Dillon
Department of Guidance and Educational P
Southern Illinois University
Carbondale, IL 62901

Non Govt

- 1 Dr. Emmanuel Donchin
Department of Psychology
University of Illinois
Champaign, IL 61820
- 1 Dr. William Dunlap
Department of Psychology
Tulane University
New Orleans, LA 70118
- 1 LCOL J. C. Eggenberger
DIRECTORATE OF PERSONNEL APPLIED RESEARC 1
NATIONAL DEFENCE HQ
101 COLONEL BY DRIVE
OTTAWA, CANADA K1A 0K2
- 1 ERIC Facility-Acquisitions
4833 Rugby Avenue
Bethesda, MD 20014
- 1 Mr. Wallace Feurzeig
Bolt Beranek & Newman, Inc.
50 Moulton St.
Cambridge, MA 02138
- 1 Dr. Edwin A. Fleishman
Advanced Research Resources Organ.
Suite 900
4330 East West Highway
Washington, DC 20014
- 1 Dr. John R. Frederiksen
Bolt Beranek & Newman
50 Moulton Street
Cambridge, MA 02138
- 1 Dr. Alinda Friedman
Department of Psychology
University of Alberta
Edmonton, Alberta
CANADA T6G 2E9
- 1 Dr. R. Edward Geiselman
Department of Psychology
University of California
Los Angeles, CA 90024

Non Govt

- 1 DR. ROBERT GLASER
LRDC
UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH
3939 O'HARA STREET
PITTSBURGH, PA 15213
- 1 Dr. Marvin D. Glock
217 Stone Hall
Cornell University
Ithaca, NY 14853
- 1 Dr. Daniel Gopher
Industrial & Management Engineering
Technion-Israel Institute of Technology
Haifa
ISRAEL
- 1 DR. JAMES G. GREENO
LRDC
UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH
3939 O'HARA STREET
PITTSBURGH, PA 15213
- 1 Dr. Harold Hawkins
Department of Psychology
University of Oregon
Eugene OR 97403
- 1 Glenda Greenwald, Ed.
"Human Intelligence Newsletter"
P. O. Box 1163
Birmingham, MI 48012
- 1 Dr. Lloyd Humphreys
Department of Psychology
University of Illinois
Champaign, IL 61820
- 1 Library
HumRRO/Western Division
27857 Berwick Drive
Carmel, CA 93921
- 1 Dr. Earl Hunt
Dept. of Psychology
University of Washington
Seattle, WA 98105

Non Govt

- 1 Dr. Ed Hutchins
Navy Personnel R&D Center
San Diego, CA 92152
- 1 Dr. Steven W. Keele
Dept. of Psychology
University of Oregon
Eugene, OR 97403
- 1 Dr. Walter Kintsch
Department of Psychology
University of Colorado
Boulder, CO 80302
- 1 Dr. David Kieras
Department of Psychology
University of Arizona
Tucson, AZ 85721
- 1 Dr. Kenneth A. Klivington
Program Officer
Alfred P. Sloan Foundation
630 Fifth Avenue
New York, NY 10111
- 1 Dr. Stephen Kosslyn
Harvard University
Department of Psychology
33 Kirkland Street
Cambridge, MA 02138
- 1 Dr. Marcy Lansman
Department of Psychology, NI 25
University of Washington
Seattle, WA 98195
- 1 Dr. Jill Larkin
Department of Psychology
Carnegie Mellon University
Pittsburgh, PA 15213
- 1 Dr. Alan Lesgold
Learning R&D Center
University of Pittsburgh
Pittsburgh, PA 15260

Non Govt

- 1 Dr. Erik McWilliams
Science Education Dev. and Research
National Science Foundation
Washington, DC 20550
- 1 Dr. Mark Miller
TI Computer Science Lab
C/O 2824 Winterplace Circle
Plano, TX 75075
- 1 Dr. Allen Munro
Behavioral Technology Laboratories
1845 Elena Ave., Fourth Floor
Redondo Beach, CA 90277
- 1 Dr. Donald A Norman
Dept. of Psychology C-009
Univ. of California, San Diego
La Jolla, CA 92093
- 1 Dr. Seymour A. Papert
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Artificial Intelligence Lab
545 Technology Square
Cambridge, MA 02139
- 1 Dr. James A. Paulson
Portland State University
P.O. Box 751
Portland, OR 97207
- 1 Dr. James W. Pellegrino
University of California,
Santa Barbara
Dept. of Psychology
Santa Barabara. CA 93106
- 1 MR. LUIGI PETRULLO
2431 N. EDGEWOOD STREET
ARLINGTON, VA 22207
- 1 Dr. Martha Polson
Department of Psychology
Campus Box 346
University of Colorado
Boulder, CO 80309

Non Govt

- 1 DR. PETER POLSON
DEPT. OF PSYCHOLOGY
UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO
BOULDER, CO 80309
- 1 Dr. Steven E. Poltrock
Department of Psychology
University of Denver
Denver, CO 80208
- 1 Dr. Mike Posner
Department of Psychology
University of Oregon
Eugene OR 97403
- 1 DR. DIANE M. RAMSEY-KLEE
R-K RESEARCH & SYSTEM DESIGN
3947 RIDGEMONT DRIVE
MALIBU, CA 90265
- 1 MINRAT M. L. RAUCH
P II 4
BUNDESMINISTERIUM DER VERTEIDIGUNG
POSTFACH 1328
D-53 BONN 1, GERMANY
- 1 Dr. Mark D. Reckase
Educational Psychology Dept.
University of Missouri-Columbia
4 Hill Hall
Columbia, MO 65211
- 1 Dr. Fred Reif
SESAME
c/o Physics Department
University of California
Berkeley, CA 94720
- 1 Dr. Lauren Resnick
LRDC
University of Pittsburgh
3939 O'Hara Street
Pittsburgh, PA 15213
- 1 Mary Riley
LRDC
University of Pittsburgh
3939 O'Hara Street
Pittsburgh, PA 15213

Non Govt

- 1 Dr. Andrew M. Rose
American Institutes for Research
1055 Thomas Jefferson St. NW
Washington, DC 20007
- 1 Dr. Ernst Z. Rothkopf
Bell Laboratories
600 Mountain Avenue
Murray Hill, NJ 07974
- 1 Dr. David Rumelhart
Center for Human Information Processing
Univ. of California, San Diego
La Jolla, CA 92093
- 1 DR. WALTER SCHNEIDER
DEPT. OF PSYCHOLOGY
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS
CHAMPAIGN, IL 61820
- 1 Committee on Cognitive Research
% Dr. Lonnie R. Sherrod
Social Science Research Council
605 Third Avenue
New York, NY 10016
- 1 Dr. David Shucard
Brain Sciences Labs
National Jewish Hospital Research Center
National Asthma Center
Denver, CO 80206
- 1 Robert S. Siegler
Associate Professor
Carnegie-Mellon University
Department of Psychology
Schenley Park
Pittsburgh, PA 15213
- 1 Dr. Edward E. Smith
Bolt Beranek & Newman, Inc.
50 Moulton Street
Cambridge, MA 02138
- 1 Dr. Robert Smith
Department of Computer Science
Rutgers University
New Brunswick, NJ 08903

Non Govt

- 1 Dr. Richard Snow
School of Education
Stanford University
Stanford, CA 94305
- 1 Dr. Robert Sternberg
Dept. of Psychology
Yale University
Box 11A, Yale Station
New Haven, CT 06520
- 1 DR. ALBERT STEVENS
BOLT BERANEK & NEWMAN, INC.
50 MOULTON STREET
CAMBRIDGE, MA 02138
- 1 Dr. Thomas G. Sticht
Director, Basic Skills Division
HUMRRO
300 N. Washington Street
Alexandria, VA 22314
- 1 David E. Stone, Ph.D.
Hazeltine Corporation
7680 Old Springhouse Road
McLean, VA 22102
- 1 DR. PATRICK SUPPES
INSTITUTE FOR MATHEMATICAL STUDIES IN
THE SOCIAL SCIENCES
STANFORD UNIVERSITY
STANFORD, CA 94305
- 1 Dr. Kikumi Tatsuoka
Computer Based Education Research
Laboratory
252 Engineering Research Laboratory
University of Illinois
Urbana, IL 61801
- 1 Dr. David Thissen
Department of Psychology
University of Kansas
Lawrence, KS 66044
- 1 Dr. John Thomas
IBM Thomas J. Watson Research Center
P.O. Box 218
Yorktown Heights, NY 10598

Non Govt

- 1 DR. PERRY THORNDYKE
THE RAND CORPORATION
1700 MAIN STREET
SANTA MONICA, CA 90406
- 1 Dr. Douglas Towne
Univ. of So. California
Behavioral Technology Labs
1845 S. Elena Ave.
Redondo Beach, CA 90277
- 1 Dr. J. Uhlaner
Perceptrics, Inc.
6271 Variel Avenue
Woodland Hills, CA 91364
- 1 Dr. Benton J. Underwood
Dept. of Psychology
Northwestern University
Evanston, IL 60201
- 1 Dr. William R. Uttal
University of Michigan
Institute for Social Research
Ann Arbor, MI 48106
- 1 Dr. Phyllis Weaver
Graduate School of Education
Harvard University
200 Larsen Hall, Appian Way
Cambridge, MA 02138
- 1 Dr. David J. Weiss
N660 Elliott Hall
University of Minnesota
75 E. River Road
Minneapolis, MN 55455
- 1 Dr. Keith T. Wescourt
Information Sciences Dept.
The Rand Corporation
1700 Main St.
Santa Monica, CA 90406
- 1 DR. SUSAN E. WHITELY
PSYCHOLOGY DEPARTMENT
UNIVERSITY OF KANSAS
LAWRENCE, KANSAS 66044

Non Govt

- 1 Dr. Christopher Wickens
Department of Psychology
University of Illinois
Champaign, IL 61820
- 1 Dr. J. Arthur Woodward
Department of Psychology
University of California